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From: HGBF@aol.com
Sent: Monday, June 16, 2008 4:36 PM
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Subject: Public comment on Graduation Competency Exams

Parents United for Public Education
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INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
 REVIEW COMMISSION

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June 16, 2008

Independent Regulatory Review Commission
 333 Market Street, 14th Floor
 Harrisburg, PA 17101

Dear Commission members:

I am a Philadelphia public school parent and a founder of a citywide parent collective called Parents United for Public Education (<http://parentsunitedphila.googlepages.com>). We represent dozens of parents citywide at a number of different schools, some that are doing quite well and some that are among the poorest in the Commonwealth. On behalf of Parents United, I am writing regarding the Graduation Competency Exams.

In January our group wrote to the Commission to express our concern about the exams, namely that if the state was concerned that children graduate with minimal skills, then the state -- especially one which ranks so poorly in equitable funding in the nation -- ought to invest more in boosting its districts up to adequate levels of funding. In addition, it was our feeling that forcing our children to take 10 high stakes tests, with minimal accommodations for special needs students and English language learners, was a punitive and misdirected attempt to promote a meaningful diploma.

Since then, our feelings have become stronger and stronger about this issue, especially as the School District of Philadelphia works to overcome a crushing deficit. This year alone we lost 250 teachers out of our schools and will lose another 151 teachers from middle schools. We lost 25% of school librarians, and our class sizes remain among the highest in the state. Facilities are struggling. This year, my daughter's feeder middle school where many of her classmates attended had a roof collapse and the children have spent the entire half year rerouted to a temporary facility.

My youngest daughter will be attending a West Philadelphia elementary school that has no science teacher, no science lab, no librarian, a part-time nurse for her asthma conditions, and where her older sister (who went through the same school) frequently complains that the bathroom and food facilities (which triple as gym and auditorium) are, frankly, "gross." There is almost no money for classroom aides or assistants. This is the groundwork that many of our students enter into high school.

The high school impoverishment is even more obvious than at the elementary level. Outdated labs, teachers teaching out of subject area, minimal offerings of advanced or challenging classes, lack of enrichment opportunities, and lack of experienced personnel is painfully obvious. Only half of teachers in our district have been teaching for more than five years, and there is a projected pay freeze in upcoming years.

As you know, these GCAs have met with stunning disapproval from across the state, both wealthy as well as impoverished districts. This is because the GCA's simply measure the bottom. They are not an achievement test; they are merely to define what is least tolerable. The issue for us as parents though is that we know the bottom. Any teacher, student or parent, knows when their child's school isn't on par. The problem is not identifying the bottom, but moving all children forward.

Tests, especially ones where children stand to lose for the failures of a dysfunctional and inequitable funding system, won't help us improve and make diplomas meaningful. We ask the Commission to heed the voices of parents and educators and table this proposal. Let's work together to improve our schools for the benefit of all our kids. This proposal at the very least needs a lot

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more work. We will be watching for your vote.

Sincerely,

Helen Gym
parent, Philadelphia

on behalf of Parents United for Public Education

cc: Leadership Team, Parents United for Public Education

Parents United for Public Education is an independent group of parents working for fiscal accountability; a public process and parent voice in decision-making; and setting priorities that place kids and classrooms first in the School District's budget. For more information, please contact Aissia Richardson, 215-236-2100, or Helen Gym, 215-808-1400. If you do not wish to receive emails, please respond back to parentsunitedphila@gmail.com. Visit us online at <http://parentsunitedphila.googlepages.com/>.

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